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ABSTRACT

Educational research and evaluation have had less impact on policy and decision making in education than hoped for, since research and evaluation represent fundamentally different kinds of endeavor than policy and decision making do. Evaluation has more impact than research because it is a more administrative activity and is more integral to policy and decision making. Educational research is conducted by individuals, is poorly supported financially, is specialized, and is difficult to synthesize. The role of research--as truth seeking and as something which should affect policy--is unclear. Policy, however, is aimed at producing action. Policy is holistic and general; carried out by publicly accountable parties; and is affected by times, context, and environment. However, four research and evaluation projects which did, in fact, have high impact were: (1) Michael Harrington's "Poverty in America"; (2) Coleman's studies of inequality and of private schools; (3) Emily Feistrizer's collection of research and its impact on policy and decision making; and (4) the Wisconsin Research and Development Center on Learning's Individually Guided Education model. The critical mass concept, timeliness, and commissioned research contributed to their impact. The study of methodology, meta analysis (including research syntheses and interpretation), and tolerance of some amount of gap between research and policy are recommended. (GDC)

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IEREA Invited Address

BALLROOM DANCING IS NOT FOR SINGLES

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INTRODUCTION

A more accurate title for these remarks might have been "The Virginia Reel cannot be danced by only one couple" or "Elaborate Ballets Cannot Be Performed by Only Two Couples." Less cryptically, the thrust of my remarks will be to explain why research and evaluation has less impact on policy and decision making in education than is generally hoped for. I will begin by identifying characteristics of research (and to a lesser extent, characteristics of evaluation) and policy and decision making (with policy being considered large bite decisions and decision making small bite decisions) that form the basis of the explanation. Next, I will offer counter examples of high impact and conclude with suggestions for researchers.

The essential explanation for the existence of the gap rests on the view that the two activities--research and evaluation on the one hand, and policy and decision making on the other--are fundamentally different kinds of human endeavor--different but not necessarily contradictory. Information from research and evaluation comprises one set of data for policy and decision making, results from a policy/decision, or is conducted within the context of specific policies or decisions.

A brief distinction between research and evaluation is in order before moving into the heart of the matter. Evaluation is, I believe, much more of an administrative activity than is research--that is, it is more clearly an activity

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that is integral to policy and decision making. To the extent that it is performed in that context, its impact possibility is enhanced (evaluation is the application of "acceptable scientific procedures" i.e., research procedures to a policy or decision maker's question). Many of the characteristics of research in education, thus, will not quite fit evaluation in education.

Characteristics of Research in Education

The first, and I think the most important, characteristic of research in education that causes the proverbial gap, is that research in education is an individually driven activity. An individual researcher will determine a problem to investigate, and carry out the research activity independent of its relationship to an immediate policy or decision that has to be made. Obviously there are individuals who make special effort to seek out research problems or questions that are related to policy and decision making, but that, too, is a matter of individual choice.

Research in education is poorly supported. A couple of examples will suffice. In 1954 when the Cooperative Research Program in the Federal Government was initiated, it had a budget of $50,000. In 1985, when the fiscal '86 budget was "put to bed" for the National Institute for Education, it was funded at approximately $60 million. Incidentally, the recent Farm Aid Concert in Champaign, Illinois raised $30 to 40 million.

Generally those who conduct research in education integrate it with other functions. In higher education institutions it is integrated with teaching and service. It is not the sole professional activity of very many people.

Research in education is an instrumental activity rather than a life's work for most of the people who engage in it. Another way of making the same point is to say that there is a limited, permanent, dedicated investment to

research in education. Perhaps that is merely another way of saying that it is poorly supported. The distinction, however, is that even the support that exists is not invested in a concentrated, dedicated way.

The object of research in education is common. Most of the research in education is carried out in or around schools, a common phenomenon also. Learning is an activity that is ubiquitous and pervasive and "known" to all.

A related characteristic is that this very common activity involves the most complex social phenomena known--namely, human behavior. It is literally mind boggling to think of the number of different human variables that interact with the process of preparing a teacher to be effective in teaching a first grade child in a given community in Iowa. There are professor characteristics, prospective teacher characteristics, school characteristics, home characteristics, and learners characteristics--and that only labels the sets. Any one of the sets, or a single/variable within a set, potentially has the major impact on the learning of this first grade child.

Research in education has typically been portrayed as truth seeking. Until recently, one of the things that meant was that research in education followed a methodology nested in a particular epistemological framework--a logical positivist framework--the essence of which is that an objective reality exists and the job of the researcher is to capture, define, and predict that reality. A somewhat more cynical explanation for the portrayal of research as truth seeking has to do with the aura of scientific expertise that it provides those engaged, and the status differentiation and rewards it affords.

The body of research in education is not easy to synthesize coming as it does from individual researchers who are isolated. Further, it is difficult to

synthesize because it involves complex behaviors, multiple variables which are difficult to control, and contradictory results.

Research in education, like the rest of society, has experienced rapid and extreme specialization, in its problems and personnel. To say that one is engaged in research in education is no more descriptive of the content of the activity than is the label 'teacher' descriptive of the content area(s) of K-12 classroom teachers.

Finally, research in education has been marked by episodic conflict over its purity (related to the philosophical issue), its quality, and its utility. Another way of making this point is to say that one of the characteristics of research that impedes its impact on policy and decision making, is a dispute among researchers as to whether it should, to say nothing of whether it could, have a direct impact.

Characteristics of Policy and Decision Making

First and foremost, policy and decision making involves values and preferences about end states of affairs. Frequently these are explicitly stated. A political party platform is the most visible example of that, although there is no reason to believe that the values and preferences stated in that platform will necessarily result in policy decisions--but one should not be surprised if they do. One could certainly define decision making as nothing more than the choosing from alternative preferred end states which represent values, attitudes, and beliefs that have some relationship to "truth" but may or may not be in any sense validated by empirical research.

Policy and decision making is aimed at producing action. The distinction between big bite decisions and small bite decisions is relevant here. But, one does not typically think of a decision being made to find out whether things

that happened were related in some way. One thinks of that kind of activity as research, and thus, the action producing character of policy and decision making versus the understanding characteristic of research is evident.

Policy and decision making is more likely than research and evaluation to be holistic if not totally whole cloth. In an effort to be able to say something definitively researchers keep seeking to delimit problems. That same tendency is present in policy and decision making, but, decision making is by its very nature more holistic than is research. And if one defines policy making to be big bite decisions (as I have), then by definition they cut a wider swath than does a research study of the effects of a particular reading instructional lesson on a particular child.

Policy and decision making is carried out in a public arena, in a broad sense, and is inherently vulnerable to change based on changes in societal preferences, or other conditions in society. While we know that certain research results are influenced by those same conditions, we tend not to think of the results of research as being as changeable as a particular decision. A simple example is that annual decisions made about funding for schools or salary increments for faculty. The relationship between monetary rewards and satisfaction and productivity, whatever that might be, is much less subject to change than is the dollar or percentage amounts that individuals receive on an annual basis.

Policy and decision making is carried out by individuals and groups who are explicitly, even if distantly, accountable. The researcher is accountable only in the technical sense for the conduct of his or her work, whereas the policy maker is accountable for the content of the decision as well as the process. One might make what at the time was an absolutely perfect decision

but later have that decision reversed, indeed might lose a job for having made that decision. Well, certainly researchers obtain different results but "that's what the data say."

Policy and decision making is, to a large extent, "for sale". That is, the decisions one makes are to some extent based on the advantages that accrue to the decision or policy makers. This point is not to remove altruism or adherence to higher order goals from decision makers, but re-iterate that policy and decision making is clearly more subject to political coalitions, changes in societal developments, and the like.

Policy and decision making serves multiple purposes. That is certainly true for a particular policy or decision. The process itself serves multiple purposes--it produces direction but it also produces involvement which impacts on the way people feel about their environment. So, both the content and the process is serving more than one purpose.

And finally, specific decisions or specific policies are dictated by times, context, or environment. Thus, irrespective of what is generally known or generally agreed to as being the best/a better way, a practice, policy or procedure is simply cast aside because of necessity.

Counter Examples

I wish to mention but four counter examples. They are counter examples in that they had, or are having, more impact than is typically the case for research and evaluation studies. I want then to extract the characteristics that are instructive for us. The first is Poverty in America by Michael Harrington that was written in the early '60's and had a major impact on the development of the war on poverty. The second are the two Coleman Studies--one on inequality in education and the other on private schools. The third example is Emily

Feistrizer's collection of research and its impact on policy and decision making currently; the fourth is the Individually Guided Education (IGE) model for elementary schools that came out of the Wisconsin Research and Development Center on Learning--the complex curricular, instructional, and administrative model for elementary schools.

These examples reflect one or more characteristics which might be instructive if we wish to increase the extent to which research can have an impact. The Wisconsin Research and Development Center example reflects a critical mass concept--that is, it takes some of the negative characteristics of research and turns them around. The R & D Center dedicated a critical mass of resources to a topic. It clearly was working on a problem that policy and decision makers were concerned about--improving elementary schools. The Coleman reports are good examples of commissioned research and, thus, reflects the characteristic of evaluation that increases impact--that is, policy or decision makers ask for a piece of research and, thus, it is more likely to have an impact. Timeliness of the research is an important characteristic. Certainly Michael Harrington's Poverty in America would be an illustration of a piece of work that was "timed right" to have an impact.

Suggestions

Let me conclude by making four (4) very specific suggestions. The first is to continue the hard scholarship associated with developing a methodology for asking and answering important questions in education. The scholarship associated with the development of methodologies for research and evaluation may well be the most significant scholarship going on in education these days. The reason for that suggestion is that this scholarship necessitates the delineation of the assumptions and values that undergird research and development

as an activity. To the extent that these coincide with the assumptions and values of policy and decision makers, research findings can have a greater impact.

A second suggestion is to seek a critical mass among researchers and/or build tight linkages which enhance programmatic research--that is, research that paints murals as well as little scenes. Centers, Labs, and other concentrated efforts are illustrative.

Concentrate on, as opposed to ignoring, research syntheses and interpretation. Perhaps it would be well not to let anyone conduct a piece of research until he/she had literally synthesized all relevant applicable research. The technology and the methodology for meta analysis at least opens the door for this possibility.

And finally, to some extent the gap is functional. The dynamic tension between "truth seekers" and policy and decision makers is indeed healthy. It would probably be a serious mistake to have the policy and decision making community totally capture the resources of the research community. Or, stated differently, don't expect too much. Some gap will be there and some chasm is healthy.